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The Want, — Individual, National :

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SERMON

PREACHED AT DORCHESTER,

APRIL 16, 1857 ;

BEING THE DAY OF THE ANNUAL FAST.

BY NATHANIEL HALL.

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S E R M O N.

Phil. ii. 12 : "WORK OUT YOUR OWN SALVATION."

WE have come together, at the recommendation of our Chief Magistrate, to a religious observance of the annual "Fast." One word about the day. It had a purpose once, — a good one, — and answered it. Its keeping was true to its designation. This, I think, can never be again, — is more and more unlikely to be ; and therefore it becomes a question for the conscience of the people, whether the day, under its present designation, *ought* not to be abolished. It may be well to have the holiday ; but let it not be labelled with such sacred phrase. The discrepancy between the occasion as we name it, and as we keep it, is offensively glaring ; is, on the face of it, — whatever less in meaning, this in fact, — a

solemn mockery, an affronting profanation ; and cannot but have, as such, a demoralizing influence. But while the day continues to be appointed, and there are any who gather to its public services, let these services have an earnest reality. Let it not be a mockery, in the sight of God, that we are here to-day.

I propose at this time, as my text may have indicated to you, to “abstain from all political discussions and secular considerations, and to address myself to the wants of the individual soul.”

These wants are all comprehended in that central one, — expressed, in the familiar language of the pulpit, as “the want of religion ;” in less vague and more evangelic phrase, the want of a regenerate and sanctified heart ; more philosophically, the want of an ascendant sway and activity of the higher sentiments and affections ; and yet again, and best of all, in Christ’s own words, the want of a supreme love to God, and of a love, equalling that for self, to our fellow-men. The wants of the soul, — they centre here ; they are comprised in this. Nay, we may compress them into a single particular, — that of love to God, as the Infinite Goodness. Let there be this, and there is all. Naturally and irresistibly, as by the

force of law and yet with the freedom of spontaneity, would justice, mercy, kindness, truth, — every virtue and every grace, — develop from this one principle, even as branches from the root, — as leaf, blossom, fruit, from the all-permeating sap. And, of course, the great end and aim of all religious teaching is to bring to the birth, is to conduct to its supremacy, this regal, Heaven-anointed power. The preacher feels, or he ought to feel, that he has fallen far short of what he is set to do, if he do not this ; that all lesser results, however desirable so far as they go, are of themselves but poor products for this divinely-given instrumentality, — the Christian ministry ; that, whatever he may do for society, — its external order, its restraining moralities, — he has sadly failed of his mission's aim, in the mind of its divine Inaugurator, until he has brought the individual man, in surrendering trust, to God, — until the spiritual pulses throb within him, and the spiritual life-currents flow, and he is regenerate, a “new creature,” a child of God. — There are two ways by which he may help to this. He may aim *directly* to call forth love to God, as a personal Being, and to inaugurate it as the supreme affection ; to bring the soul to choose, once for all, by a deliberate, conscious act,

God's will, *as* his ; or he may aim at this more indirectly, by urging to an instant fidelity, at every sacrifice, to the ever-present promptings of the moral and spiritual nature. These instinctive promptings are the motions of God's spirit: obedience to them is obedience to God, however unconsciously rendered as such, and leads on to and prepares for a love of goodness and himself as the supreme affection. And the great want of the unregenerate soul is the want of a *will* to this obedience ; of a will to struggle perseveringly against all counter-solicitations, whencesoever they come ; a will to do manful battle against the world, the flesh, and the devil ; to serve God rather than self ; to hearken to right before expediency ; to bow to conscience before constitutions ; to the Supreme Court of Heaven before any that is of earth ; a will, in a word, to be true to itself, and thus to God *in* itself. And what a want it is ! and how, by reason of it, by reason of a practical indifference and disloyalty to these divine instincts of our nature, which tell of and persuade to the everlastingly right and true and lovely, do they gradually and imperceptibly lose their delicateness of sensibility to moral distinctions ! God retires from the soul that prefers another sovereign to himself, — retires, not of choice,

but by necessity. The heavenly vision that dawns with beckoning radiance in unpervverted souls, to lead them on to its enkindling Source, fades, unobeyed, — that heavenly vision fades within them, into the light of common day: while, all unaware of their judicial bewilderment, they call evil good and good evil, put darkness for light and light for darkness; cunning they take for wisdom, and expediency for rectitude, and self-seeking for philanthropy. They enact the plausible, until themselves believe it genuine; they deal in counterfeits, until they become insensible to the signatures of reality, to the ring of truth; ay, all faith do they lose in reality and truth, within the realm of the moral and spiritual, — faith in the soul's divine capacities, relationships, destinies; faith in a righteous Providence; faith in a present God. While they prate about virtue and religion, as if they really believed in them, and think they do; as if they really possessed them, and think they do, — they neither possess nor believe in them, livingly and truly, as their lives declare. Clearly enough, they believe in *some* things, — such as office, honor, money, power. For these they will stoop to the meanest tasks, and pay the costliest price. They show their faith — where and in what it is — by their works.

And still, beneath all this, the divine is there; and still it speaks, at every interval of the heart's relenting, at every season of inward stillness, at every lull of the surgings of base desire; and still the want, nearest and first, is of a will to listen and obey. I repeat, to be practically true to ourselves, our real selves, the God within us; to honor, by prompt and unfaltering obedience, the convictions which are bound in with the very fibres of the soul, and can be wholly silenced but when that is dead, — *this* it is, the will, the wish for this, which constitutes the foremost want of the individual soul, the initial step in the process of its salvation. We look too far for the means to this blessed end: they are in our hands; they are all about us. Personal salvation, — is it to be found, think you, in lifeless churches; in empty formalities; by mocking Heaven with prayers for what we do not wish? Nay: but personal salvation, if indeed we wish it, is to be found — in the streets, at the caucus, at the polls; in places of sociality, labor, traffic, — *wherever* deeds are to be done or trials borne; wherever conscience and love are conscious powers; wherever the divine within you urges one way, and the natural heart another; wherever the appeal of suffering and oppression reaches

you from near or far, and against the impulse to hear and help rise the atheistic questionings of self-interest and expediency ; wherever truth and right are assailed, and you are tempted, in a craven fear of personal consequences, to withhold the testimony, from act or lip, which your heart is rendering, — there and everywhere, in a free, loyal, determined choice, at all hazards and at any cost, of God's eternal will, as it thrills and throbs, or but faintly whispers, in your inmost consciousness, is salvation to be found. Here is the way, — a “ strait and narrow ” one, but leading unto life. “ *Work* out your salvation,” says the Bible. Be practically obedient to the word within ; “ for it is God that worketh in you.” Work it out, not with fore-aiming calculation of the issue, not with any thought about salvation ; but seeking only to be instantly and wholly faithful to the inteaching God. *Work* it out. Here, for instance, are the unfortunate, the wretched, the outcast, the enslaved. They lift a plea to you in the very fact of their condition ; and your hearts answer to it. Yes, they do. Deep down within them is a something that tells you to espouse the cause of these fellow-beings, — to speak for them and act for them, as you have opportunity and power. Then, *do*

it, — for their sakes and your own. Give yourselves, freely, uncalculatingly, *lovingly*, with the many or the few, with a continuance of social favor and position or the loss of them, to the ever-present, ever-pressing demands of defrauded and despised humanity; and you shall be lifted thus, surely and consciously, towards the Infinite Love. That spark of its own enkindling, reverently followed, as clearer and wider its light shall spread, shall be a regenerating power within the soul, — its Bethlehem-star to lead it to its Lord.

The want, then, primary and pressing, of the individual soul, is of a will to be true to its own instant inspirations; to lay hold and keep hold, always and everywhere, of the eternal right, as revealed — beneath the culture of an opened Gospel and an entreated Spirit — within itself.

And what is thus the want of the individual soul, is, of course, the want of society, of the State. Our political salvation lingers; our national decline, in all that is high and worthy, is year by year accelerated, not from lack of knowledge, but of will, — the will simply to do what heart and conscience in every breast are telling us. It is for the want of this, simply this, in your souls and mine, and the souls of

the larger portion of its teeming thousands, that this nation of ours, as represented by the spirit that dominates in its councils and tribunals, stands before the world, with all its proud pretensions and sacred pledges in behalf of freedom and humanity, in the ineffable disgrace of being an organized tyranny over the bodies and souls of millions of human beings. It is for the want of this, simply this, that so many consent to become partners, active or silent, in this systematized iniquity ; partners, as all are who withhold their influence, however small its measure, — any act or any word for which God gives them opportunity and power, — for the rectification of the public sentiment, in whose strength it stands. It is for the want of this that God's Law, the unwritten and the enacted, is set aside and overridden, to help on oppression's triumph ; that God's Word is turned and tortured, that it may teach a lie and uphold injustice ; that God's Spirit is slighted and spurned, in the person of the slave, nor less of the dark man free. For do you suppose there is no remonstrance against all this in the breasts of those who consent to and are responsible for it ; — that there was not once, if possibly, through the depravement of a resisted nature, there is not now ? Nay, *now* there is, in every soul of

them. Through the wrappage of falsities with which custom, prejudice, passion, greed, have swathed and deadened it, might they get close enough to the seat of its yet remaining vitality, would they not hear it? Did ever God so desert his dearest work that this could not be? Truly, if there *be* one who holds and treats his fellow-beings as if they were but brutes; compelling them to unrequited toils, compelling them to basest uses; robbing them of their rights, robbing them of their offspring; barring them in, by force and law, from all participation in the commonest privileges of a surrounding civilization; — if there be one who prostitutes his position of place and power — executive, legislative, judicial, ecclesiastical — to the strengthening or upholding, or shielding from its due reproach, directly or indirectly, this nefarious institution; if there be one, who, for office or gain or any thing, consents to slavery's extension or existence, knowing what it is and what it does; if, I say, there be such a one, at whose soul's centre there is no conscious protest against these things, no compunctious visitings, no whispers of rebuke, then the retributive justice of God has done for that soul its most fearful work: it is no more a child of his; it has parted with its birthright, and become a fiend.

But so it cannot be. The want is simply of a will to hear — to hear and heed — what God is still proclaiming in their souls.

It does seem indeed, at times, as if we of these Northern communities were, in a fearful measure, God-deserted, as a just retribution for our self-allowed indifference and inaction with regard to this national iniquity. Most assuredly are we suffering from this cause, in that saddest of all forms, — a blunting and deadening of the heart's holiest sensibilities. Consider it. How little moved we are in view of the human millions whom our nation is thus treading beneath its imperious heel, — is driving before its merciless lash! The sympathy that reaches them from other shores is quicker, fuller, than our own; the appreciation of the political inconsistency and moral outrage which their lot presents, is readier and juster. We hear about their sufferings, and sleep none the less soundly for it. We look around on our abounding blessings, and marvel at the "fanaticism" that demands, if in tones that ring of earnestness, our pitying interest in these unblessed and hapless ones. We sit within homes which no foot of man can lawfully invade, whose loved and loving members no hand but God's may pluck from us, — ours to love, to

serve, to live for, and die with ; and yet our eyes are dry and our bosoms passionless at thought of those, with the same nature as ours, the same instinctive affections, the same tenderness of attachment to their own flesh, with parental and filial emotions as fathomless, who have no accorded right to any of the beings to whom nature and love have bound them ; who are liable — nay, are doomed — to have torn from them, for a life-long separation, those to whom their hearts are clinging with yearning fondness. We congratulate ourselves upon our civil rights and immunities ; we see around us the memorials of the heroic struggle by which they were achieved ; we tread on soil which tears and blood, for dear Liberty's sake, have hallowed in our regard ; and yet we veil not our faces, we bow not our heads, in veriest shame, that beneath the canopy of the same political sky are human multitudes, made beasts of burden, and chattels of commerce, and victims of lust ; decreed, at Freedom's own judgment-seat, to have no claim to be treated as men. We gather in our churches ; we surround our communion-tables ; we meditate on the Redeemer's love ; and yet a single prayer of sympathy, even here, in behalf of these poor outcasts for whom Christ died, proves too much, how often, for quiet sufferance.

Event succeeds event, of most startling atrocity, enlarging the bounds and strengthening the power of this barbaric institution, and bringing us closer and closer with it in political fellowship and responsibility; and yet the feeling that follows them, how temporary and how barren! — begotten less, I fear, of a true humanity, than of a sectional pride; less in view of slavery as a moral wrong, than a political inconsistency; less for the evils it is actually inflicting on its helpless victims, than for those, immeasurably less, it may possibly induce upon ourselves and our children.

But these things cannot always be. We shall awake, at last, to the awful majesty and eternal claim of Justice; and our eyes see, and our ears hear, and our hearts attend to, the things that belong no less to our present than our everlasting peace. God's judgment will not long linger. Some calamitous consummation — as the necessary sequence of existing causes, the natural product of a Heaven-defying iniquity — must await us; to be averted but by our instant fidelity to the inward law; by a resolved resistance, not to Slavery's encroachments only, but to Slavery's *self*, as *in* itself, intrinsically and eternally, a sin and a wrong, an affront to God, and a curse to man.

Friends, I have thus met this occasion, however unworthily, conscientiously. I have abstained, as I promised, from all “political discussions and secular considerations.” I have nothing to do with these here. This place is for the enunciation of God’s eternal truth, and the direct and searching application of it to politics, and to every other sphere of human activity and influence. It is a bad sign when the attempt is made, or the desire expressed, to have the pulpit other than this. It were a worse thing, should it ever become so, — should it ever yield to the counsellings of any lower authority than His in whose name it stands. Alas for the nation whose prophets prophesy falsely, or equivocally, or haltingly; who shrink from declaring, in its majestic fulness, their intrusted message, or venture, for the sake of peace, or the supposed interests of religion, or for any thing, to tone it down in aught to the demands of an unchristianized public sentiment; who become but the indicators of the popular feeling, with regard to established immoralities; and whose independence consists in an intensified utterance of what the many have come to approve, and all to bear! Alas for the nation, when the cry of “political preaching,” levelled against the doctrine of human

brotherhood, against Christ's law and life of love, against the golden rule of equity, in their condemning rebuke of existing institutions and usages, — when this echoing cry is at all an availing one, — is not seen and stamped as the insulting folly that it is! Do we not all see that the teaching of these, a practical adjustment to them of the life of nations as of individuals, is the only way of salvation for either; that the institutions which these condemn are, by that fact, in conflict with all social order and true prosperity? And no less true is it, that such institutions cannot be tolerated in a community, without re-acting to corrupt its *individual* souls; that in the contamination of the general moral atmosphere, the sure debauchment of the public conscience, which their presence causes, each separate heart must, more or less, partake; and that, therefore, the prayer and striving of each true disciple, as he would speed the coming of the heavenly reign, as he would remove an obstacle alike to political and spiritual regeneration, should be for their overthrow and abolishment.

